

In support of HB 432: Thank you for putting this bill on the schedule and for hearing our input. I am representing a now-forming Co-op of Montana grass-fed, organic livestock producers from around the state to support HB432. Our position is straightforward: patent holders must take responsibility for their own actions. If they feel they can't, something is wrong. We have seen that it is reckless for ranchers, farmers and consumers to trust that government regulations are eliminating liability risks, and we feel our own ventures are at risk due to roundup ready alfalfa.

I want to add my individual perspective as a twenty-year-veteran-newcomer to agriculture. I am preoccupied with the young people who are not here today. They are voting with their feet, walking right out of commodity agriculture. Many have sought us out to talk at Thirteen Mile Farm, because we are not their parents, and because we are out of the commodity mainstream.

I am submitting some written testimony on a few of their stories, ranging from that of a daughter of two former Republican legislators, to a new Executive Chef in Fort Benton that I delivered lamb to this morning---he doesn't see a viable future on his Dad's 12,000 acre farm outside Great Falls, unless he converts to organic. You may brush off my stories as anecdotal if you like, but you cannot deny the statistics on the number of crop science students at MSU (they have plummeted to just a handful); or the average age of farmers (>55 and climbing); or the dependence of our region on government subsidies.

It is time to let the hypothetical intellectual capital of the seed companies stand on its own, without extorting the real property rights of our farmers and their neighbors; the tax coffers of our state; and perhaps most importantly, the real intellectual capital of the next generation.

It perplexes me that some of the Associations in this state advocate keeping this liability burden on their members' shoulders, even as some of their prominent members, the most commercially successful in the real marketplace, express well-founded dissent. I am aware of the arguments---China is working on GE crops and we should be worried about losing an edge; climate change is here and we need a drought-resistance pill, and so forth. There is nothing about HB432 which keeps them from holding out such hope if such hope is real. Furthermore, rejecting HB432 will not help them negotiate the real and present dangers to Montana's ag economy and ecology----the disproportionate freight rates to BNSF that suck out one-third of revenues no matter what kind of seed is in the rail car to Seattle; the nematode that is diminishing yields in yet-undocumented acreage; and the brain drain of a vital youth. The fundamental principles of soil-health, of selling what customers want, and of building resilience through diversity and adaptability are the principles that will govern our success or failure in the face of climate- and economic change.

Demanding liability protection for the sake of the next generation is not a lot to ask. It is logical, reasonable, and necessary.

Sincerely,



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ATTACHMENT

HB432 cont'd

B. Weed

I'm preoccupied with the young people who are not here today. They are voting with their feet, walking right out of commodity agriculture.

I cite a few examples below. You may brush off my stories as anecdotal, but you cannot deny the statistics on the number of crop science students at MSU and the average age of farmers .

#1

At a meeting, a young woman who grew up on a 4th generation ranch on the Rocky Mountain Front said, "If I had been exposed to an alternate vision of agriculture when I was in High School, I wouldn't have been so desperate to leave Montana as fast as I possibly could". Maybe some of you know her; she is now the Executive Director of a conservation organization that is working to develop solutions to the conflicts between agriculture and conservation. Her parents are former Republican legislators, and she herself is a former staffer for Larry Craig and Conrad Burns.

#2

At an international organic livestock meeting at the University of Minnesota this past August, a former MSU Range student approached me after my talk to tell me that when she was at MSU, she noticed that her young peers in FFA, the Farm Bureau, and Montana Stockgrowers said very little when their elders were present. So she and a few friends organized a series of 3 meetings among those 3 organizations, but nobody older than 23 was invited. She said they held the most stimulating, provocative, and exciting discussions of her agricultural career. She now works for Oregon Tilth—one of the premier organic certification organizations in the U.S.; she said she wants to get good experience before returning to agriculture in Montana.

#3

A sous-chef in Big Sky visited our ranch several times to buy lamb for his restaurant. During the first visit he told me he wanted to return to agriculture, but he couldn't see a future at his Dad's 12,000-acre grain farm outside Great Falls. During the last visit he proudly announced that he had convinced his Dad to convert a very small acreage to organic to begin cropping trials. This morning I delivered lamb to this young man at his new job as Executive Chef in Fort Benton. He's working his way home.

These young people (and there are more), are smart and creative. They are unimpressed with hypothetical promises of the ultimate drought-resistant and disease-resistant wheat, as long as the risk is foisted on to their parents and peers rather than patent holders. They remain connected to, and respectful of, their parents and peers who remain in mainstream agriculture. They know full well that not everybody can grow carrots for the Farmers Market, and that inter-state, and international grain markets will not and should not disappear. But they seek an economically and ecologically viable agriculture that grows food foremost, not commodities.